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ABSTRACT

Securing funds to support a project does not necessarily guarantee its success. For any venture to be successful it must be undergirded by an effective management system. Discussed are four basic questions on the topic of effective project management. (1) When should project management start? (2) Who is responsible for the effective management project? (3) What elements need to be considered in effective project management? (4) When are the responsibilities of the project manager completed? (Author/KE)

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EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF CONTRACT ACTIVITIES

Donald L. Clark

What is your reaction upon hearing that one of your peers has been awarded a grant for a research, developmental, or training activity? Whatever your reaction, you may be interested to learn just how he or she secured this support. It is often as simple as this; he or she had an idea and was able to sell it. A significant problem or activity had been identified, properly described in a proposal, and submitted to an appropriate funding agency.

Securing funds to support a project, however, does not necessarily guarantee its success anymore than buying a previously successful business is a guarantee that the business will continue to be profitable. For any venture to be successful, it must be undergirded with an effective management system.

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Industrial educators at both the secondary and post-secondary levels are often called upon to develop proposals for funding, and then when funding is secured, to serve as project directors for the proposed activity. Many individuals have received professional preparation in how to prepare proposals; however, very few individuals have considered the important element of project management. It can be accurately stated that the success of a contract activity is directly proportional to the effectiveness of the management of the project. For purposes of this discussion, I would like for us to consider four basic questions regarding effective project management.

I. When should project management start?
II. Who is responsible for the effective management of a project?
III. What elements need to be considered in effective project management?
IV. When are the responsibilities of the project manager completed?

I. When should project management start?

Officially project management starts as soon as notification of a grant award has been received. In reality, however, it starts with the conceptulization of the project and should be included as an integral part of the original proposal. In fact, the inclusion of a management plan is in most instances one of the elements that funding agencies carefully consider in making grant awards. Many proposal guidelines and RFP's (Request for Proposals) request such a plan and may place considerable weight on it in the evaluation section.

II. Who is responsible for the effective management of the project?

A related question could be asked: Who received the grant--the individual who wrote the proposal or the institution? In most cases, the grant is made to an institution; thus, the administrative structure of that institution will dictate how the grant will be administered. However, even if an institution employs a full-time grants administrator, the individual identified as project director in the grant award document is the person responsible for the

effective management of the project. In most institutions of higher education, there are established offices for contract activity, and it behooves the project director to effectively utilize the services provided by these offices. The wise project director will make it a team effort and benefit from the experience of the grants manager.

It is also appropriate to involve other project members in selected management activities; however, the ultimate responsibility for management decision-making belongs to the project director. When the principal investigator (if this is someone other than the project director) and the research assistants must utilize their time in management functions then the project may be impaired.

III. What elements need to be considered in effective project management?

The items presented in this section are not intended to be all inclusive nor are they mutually exclusive. However, it is believed that each element presented merits consideration as an element in effective project management.

Grant Award Document. The grant award document, including in most cases a copy of the original proposal, forms the legal guidelines under which the grant or contract is to be conducted. In reviewing the grant award, it is important to review all attachments and references to regulations that have been published previously. If a revision is requested in the work schedule either at the time the grant is received or at a later date, it is important that it is reflected in the original grant award. It can be a serious mistake to agree to a reduction in an original budget without insisting that a corresponding modification in the scope of work be reflected in the grant award.

Staffing. The staffing plan needs to be well-documented in the

original proposal, both in terms of positions to be filled and in the qualifications of the personnel to fill the positions. The project director is generally identified by name in the grant award document, and if a change at this level is made it may require the concurrence of the funding agency. The importance of employing staff members, including the secretary, who have qualifications to accomplish the task at hand cannot be over emphasized. Providing employment for individuals who just happen to be available generally does not provide the best yield. A major problem encountered by project directors in institutions of higher education is the employment of faculty members at 25%-50% time on a project who are subsequently given teaching loads and committee meetings that seriously cut into the time alloted to the project.

A good management system will provide guidelines for line and staff responsibilities and further will allow each staff member to know where and how he or she fits into the organization. It can also provide the opportunity for each staff member to make a full contribution. Staff involvement will most likely assist in the operation of a successful project; however, the factor of greatest importance is the initial selection of staff members.

Facilities. The facilities needed to effectively carry out a project are generally furnished by the institution receiving the grant. Rent in most cases will not be charged to the project because it is covered by the indirect costs rate established between the grantee and the grantor. The commitment of an institution to the support of R&D activities can generally be determined by the quality of facilities provided.

A good plan of action is to identify in specific terms the type and quantity of space that would be needed to conduct the project in the original proposal at the time the institutional sign-off is required. The

type and quantity of space provided by the institution might also be reflective of the management ability of the project director.

Work Schedule. PERT or some modification thereof should be implemented. A graphic schedule--a map--needs to be developed and posted that allows each staff member to see how he or she fits into the organization and more importantly, how the tasks to be conducted by each staff member fit into the overall time frame. A detailed, graphic work schedule can be of great assistance to the project manager in making certain that some small, but very important element of the project is not inadvertently dropped. There are many good texts on this topic that should be reviewed if the project director is not familiar with this technique.

Process Evaluation. Program audit might be a better heading for this section. Audit procedures should be detailed in the original proposal and written into the budget. If funding permits, it is a good plan to have a third party evaluator make an objective review of the project. Project personnel sometimes get too close to a project to be objective in an assessment of its effectiveness.

Maintainance of Records. The funding agency generally requires an accounting of funds as well as effort. The fiscal office or grant office generally handles the accounting of funds; however, this does not remove the responsibility of good funds management from the project director. In order to do this he needs accurate fiscal records. A final report for the project detailing the process utilized and the ultimate yield of the project will not be a major task if good records are maintained from the inception of the project.

Monitoring of Funding. Most projects do not operate on an even-flow budget. On a $100,000 grant for a 10 month project it is seldom that $10,000 would be spent each month. Most fiscal control offices are not able to

monitor much more than an even-flow. Thus, it is imparative that the project director review, at least on a monthly basis, the flow of funds and make adjustments when necessary.

Interim and Final Reports. As a minimum, reports must be submitted to the funding agency, or its designee, as indicated in the grant award document. A form and format for the required reports is often provided by the funding agency. In the absence of good records, the preparation of reports becomes an onerous if not impossible task. With good records it can be a rewarding experience as well as serving as a synthesis of the project.

IV. When are the responsibilities of the project director completed?

Technically the project director's responsibilities end with the submission and acceptance of the final report. They may diminish; however, in reality, they will never end.

Based upon the yield of a funded project, the project director needs to pursue with professional diligence other related projects. If the project was a basic research activity, it should have a yield from which an applied project could be developed. If it was an applied research project, it should lead to an inservice training program. If it was an inservice program, it should lead to a preservice program. Moreover, any of these programs can generate related R&D or training activities which will allow for good stewardship of funds as well as continued professional development for the project director and the profession which he represents.

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